Dark Skills and Moral Gaps: Prevalence of Emotional Manipulation, Aggression, Empathy, and Self-Serving Cognitions in Adults

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the current research study was to find the prevalence of trait emotional manipulation, aggression, empathy, and self-serving cognitive distortions in adults. A sample of 575 adults aged 18 years was recruited via a convenience sampling technique from the adult population of Punjab. Scales used to collect data were the Emotional Manipulation Ability Scale (Jane & Grieve, 2014), the State-Trait-Anger-Expression-Inventory-2 (STAXI-2) (Spielberger, 1988), the Basic Empathy Scale (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006), and the ICP Cognitive Distortions Scale-Urdu (Shakeel, 2014). The reliability of the Urdu version of STAXI-II is .90, Emotional Manipulation Ability Scale is .83, reliability of empathy is .84, and the self-serving cognitive distortions is .90. Prevalence results indicates that 73.0% participants have aggression, 60.7% participants have trait emotional manipulation, 87.0% participants have empathy, and 60.7% participants have Self-serving cognitive distortions. These findings have implications for both research and practice, highlighting the importance of considering these psychological constructs in interventions aimed at promoting mental well-being and fostering healthy interpersonal relationships within the population.

Keywords: Trait Emotional Manipulation, Aggression, Empathy, And Self-Serving Cognitive Distortions

Introduction

Adults are not inherently prone to manipulation, aggression, or cognitive distortions; rather, vulnerability, stress, past trauma, and certain life circumstances can make any adult more susceptible to these issues, just as they affect individuals of any age. Emotional manipulation can be defined as: This emotional strategy of influencing the emotions of others in a manner that will allow him or her to achieve a preferred goal is what is often called the dark side of emotional intelligence (Austin et al., 2007). The level of empirical evidence is that males have higher chances to perform such behavior

(Grieve & Panebianco, 2013; Hyde and Grieve, 2018).

An assertion or activity can be supposed to be manipulative in the event that is not connected with or appeals to individuals' ability for intelligent and deliberative decision. One issue with manipulation is that it neglects to regard individuals' self-rule and is an attack against their autonomy. Another issue is that in the event that are a result of manipulation, individuals' decisions may neglect to advance their own individual assistance, and may rather assist the manipulator (Sunstein, 2015). A few types of manipulation are offensive, as a striking, realistic depiction of an end-product, for instance, winning the lottery and losing a newborn child is conjured as an approach to persuade people to take part in certain activities, for instance, to purchasing a lottery ticket and taking a train. A few practices of manipulation are minor, as when a political candidate, an employee, or a waiter uses loss aversion, manner of speaking, and noticeable appearances to empower certain choices (Sunstein, 2015). Emotional manipulation is the utilization of a significant proportion of enthusiastic abilities to manipulate others for self-serving reasons (Gough, 2016).

The second variable of the current research is aggressive behaviors. Aggressive behaviors are the acts that are aimed at causing or threatening damages (Malti and Rubin, 2018). These actions may be categorized as direct actions that include physical or verbal actions that of targeting an individual, and relational actions that compromise the social status or the access of an individual to social resources. Instead, they can be indirect, which entails attempts by the aggressor to hide intentions or identity (Dewi and Kyranides, 2021). Aggression can be proactive, opportunistic, a reaction to frustration or threats (perceived or actual), or completely unprovable (Merk et al., 2005). The effects of aggression are further carried to the target, the family, the witnesses or bystanders, and the entire society, where they can result in emotional damage, mental illness, and more financial costs in health and correction services (Richard, 2022).

Aggression may take many forms, with physical, verbal, and social structures being the most common. Physical aggressiveness refers to behaviors such as striking, kicking, hurting, and beating the target. It can likewise incorporate purposefully harming the individual's property, for example, breaking their windows. (Allen & Anderson, 2022). Verbal aggression utilizes verbal conduct to hurt the individual, for example, shouting, ridiculing, and spreading bits of gossip. Social aggression is conduct that is expected to hurt the individual's social connections. Social aggression or spreading gossip and mean rumors is an action that is supposed to hurt social relationships of a person. This kind of aggression, which is aimed specifically to sabotage the social relationship of the victim, is an example of the practice of spreading sensationalized information.

It incorporates spreading rumors (and accordingly covers with verbal hostility), lying, and dispersing humiliating photographs fundamentally any conduct that is planned to hurt the interpersonal relationships of the target individual. Passive aggressiveness is a less well-informed form of aggression (Allen & Anderson, 2022).

Contrary to aggressive behaviors, empathy intends to capture others' feelings, the reasons for those feelings, and to have the option to contribute to the enthusiastic revel in a person without being a fragment of it (Keen, 2007). There have been two lines of research historically defined in the study of empathy (Davis, 1980). To begin with, affectively, empathy refers to the resonance with the affective experience of some other person. Eisenberg and Miller (2020) suggest that this consists of sharing the same feeling with the other person, which is what Hatfield et al. (2023) term emotional contagion. Affective empathy may cause positive and negative affect; due to the multi-componential nature of the emotions, subjective experiences, cognitions, expressions, and

physiological and behavioral responses may vary depending on the type of emotion (Olderbak et al., 2024). Another aspect of affective empathy is the ability to experience a suitable response, but not the same, to the emotion of another, e.g., caring and sympathizing in the feelings of another when one sees them sad (Batson et al., 2002). Second, cognitively, empathy shows the capacity of an individual to take the position of another individual and decode non verbal communication (Wispé, 1986). According to Baron -Cohen and Wheelwright (2004), this cognitive definition of empathy is closely related to theory of mind. This is in alignment with Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright (2024) conceptualization of empathy as one that involves both an affective and cognitive aspect (Davis, 1983; Decety and Jackson). This broad framework can help us better comprehend empathy and its implications since an affective constituent of empathy clarifies why we are motivated to feel for those in need, whereas, a cognitive constituent of empathy clarifies how we recognize and label the feelings of others (Batson, 2019).

Forth variable is cognitive distortions. Cognitive distortions are generally conceptualized as mistaken or one-sided methods of giving importance to encounters (Barriga et al., 2020). Gibbs and Potter presented a four-class typological model of self-serving psychological dysfunctions: Egocentric, Accusing Others, Diminishing/Mislabeling, and Pretentious the Worst. Egocentric, Accusing Others, Diminishing/Mislabeling, and Pretentious the Worst are the four classes in Gibbs and Potter's typological model of self-serving psychological dysfunctions. Egocentric cognitive distortions are represented as viewpoints in which the individual focuses so much on his or her own judgments, aspirations, goals, and rights that the assessments or needs of others are rarely, if ever, considered. Individuals who accuse others of their own faults use intellectual constructions and rather find sources outside themselves that they can blame with their own liabilities. Limiting is characterized as contortions in which the deficient conduct is viewed as a suitable, potentially fundamental, approach to accomplish positive dreams. Mislabeling is shown as a degrading and demeaning way of relating to people. Finally, assuming the Worst refers to mental swerves in which an individual ascribes dangerous goals to others thinks about the direct outcome imaginable as unavoidable or sees his/her own conduct as past progress (Gibbs, 1991). The cognitive distortions or distorted patterns of thoughts are common with people who feel shame, as they use different narratives to manage shame (Verkade et al., 2019).

Objectives of the current study
To find the prevalence of Trait Emotional Manipulation, Aggression, Empathy, and Self-serving Cognitive Distortions in Adults

Research methodology
Participants
A sample of 575 adults above 18 years was selected by using a convenience sampling technique from the adult population of Punjab. The item-to-sample ratio was used to calculate the sample size. The recommended sample ratio is 1:10, but 1:5 is also acceptable as per Kline (2016). The sample was recruited from many different educational institutions, recreational sites, malls, banks, online and university students, door-to-door surveys, and residential areas of Pakistan.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of participants (N=575)

Demographic variables	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Age		

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18-29	196	34.1
30-40	159	27.7
41-52	170	29.6
53 and above	50	8.7
Gender		
Male	335	58.1
Female	240	41.6
Residence		
Urban	294	51.1
Rural	281	48.9
Marital status		
Married	292	50.8
Unmarried	283	49.2
Socioeconomic status		
Upper-middle class	171	29.7
Middle class	216	37.6
Lower class	188	32.7
Education		
Matric or below	197	34.3
Intermediate	165	28.7
Graduate and above	213	37.0
Monthly income		
Below 18000	172	29.9
18000-40000	192	33.4
Above 40000	211	36.7
Family system		
Nuclear	310	53.9
Joint	265	46.1

Data Collection Instruments
An informed consent form, Socio-demographic variables, and four standardized scales were used to measure the variables of the current study. Before collecting demographic information, informed consent was obtained from all participants through a comprehensive consent process. A demographic information form was prepared to collect information about age, gender, number of siblings, birth order, family system, residents' area, any illness, socioeconomic status, education, occupation, and income of subjects. A set of questionnaires was used to check or measure trait emotional manipulation, empathy, aggression, and self-serving cognitive distortions in adults. The following is a description of the tools being used in this research.

Emotional Manipulation Ability Scale
It measures the emotional manipulation. It is a scale that measures one's inclination towards emotional manipulation, comprised of 10 items. The 10-item subscale was used to assess emotional manipulation, and the subscale shows excellent internal reliability. Responses are graded on a 5-point scale, with 1 indicating severe disagreement and 5 indicating strong agreement. The reliability of the Urdu version of the Emotional Manipulation Ability Scale was .83.

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The State-Trait-anger-expression-inventory-2 (STAXI-2)
The State-Trait-Anger-Expression Inventory-2 (STAXI-2; Spielberger, 1999) measures the experience, expression, as well as control of anger. Applied to patients sixteen years and above, it is based on a 57 item self-report instrument that measures 5 dimensions of anger, namely, state-anger, trait-anger, anger-expression-in, anger-expression-out and anger-control. The respondents respond to each item on a four-point scale, with one referring to not at all and four referring to almost always. The STAXI has a high level of consistency, with alpha coefficients ranging from.81 to.93 (Spielberger, 1999).

Basic Empathy Scale
The basic empathy scale is a 20-item questionnaire that assesses both cognitive and affective empathy. In 2006, Jolliffe and Farrington created the BES. On a 5-point Likert scale, members had the answers are converted based on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree). Nine of them evaluate cognitive empathy (Items 3, 6, 9, 10, 12, 14, 16, 19, 20) and eleven items evaluate affective empathy (Items 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 11, 13, 15, 17, 18).
 in the two-factor paradigm. The internal consistency (alpha) of basic empathy scale estimates ranged from 0.79 to 0.85 (Jolliffe& Farrington, 2006).

ICP Cognitive Distortions Scale-Urdu (Shakeel, 2014)
The ICP Cognitive Distortions Scale-Urdu is an 18-item questionnaire designed to assess various Cognitive Distortions that contribute to mental illness. It may be used on both adults and children. The CDS-U is a five-point Likert scale that ranges from 1 to 5, with 1 meaning "not at all applicable to me" and 5 meaning "completely applicable to me." The ICP Cognitive Distortion Scale-Urdu is divided into four subscales: stress-inducing thinking style (things 1,2,3,4,9,10,11,13,14), self-criticism/self-blaming thinking style (5,6,7), predictive thinking style (8,15,18), and critical or rigid thinking style (12,16,17). The reliability of the ICP Cognitive Distortions Scale-Urdu is .90.

Procedure
Data was gathered after obtaining all necessary approvals from the relevant authors, informing them about the research methodology and objectives. The study's objective was communicated to the participants, and they were informed that no compensation would be provided for participating in the study. The survey was conducted in person, through online methods, and via door-to-door outreach with the participants. Participants who wished to take part and met the inclusion criteria provided informed consent. The scales provided in English were converted into the Urdu language for the general public. The present study was carried out in two stages; in the initial stage, the scales were translated into Urdu to enhance subjects' comprehension. In the second phase, data were gathered to identify the connections between variables. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point during the research. Following the collection of questionnaires from the participants, it was observed that there were no unanswered questions. If there are any unanswered questions, then it is requested to finish the questionnaire. Data gathering was conducted using paper-and-pencil forms and online methods, but for individuals unable to read and write, questions were posed orally, and their answers were recorded.

Data Analysis
After data collection, data screening was done. Data was analyzed by using a normality test. Data analysis was done by using SPSS version 29. Neural network analysis, frequency, and descriptive analysis statistics were used in this research.

Ethical Considerations
Research ethics were strictly followed in the present study. Formal permission was taken by the authors to use the scales for research purposes. Informed consent was signed by participants who volunteered for the present study. Adults were briefed that their participation is free and voluntarywithout any negative consequences for their refusal, and they have the right to say I can't fill it anymore at any point. The purpose of the present study, along with confidentiality of participants' personal information and its usage only for research purposes, was clearly spelled out to them both orally and in written consent. Participants were informed that results would be made available to them at the library of the University of Gujrat in printed form, and in electronic form would be emailed to them. All the participants and authorities were thanked personally for their cooperation in doing my work.

Results and Interpretation
The outliers, missing data, and patterned wrong responses were filtered to avoid biases in the study results. Data screening processes were carried out in SPSS that included frequency checks of every response item, verification of minimum and maximum values and histogram reviews. Questionnaires were also visually checked to ensure that they did not miss any item in data collection, and later checked randomly. Entry errors were fixed after verification by the respondents. Incomplete questionnaires which presented signs of extreme or zigzag responses which indicated disengagement were not included in the sample. After cleaning the data, the reverse scoring of negatively worded items was carried out, and composite scores were calculated.

Data normality
Normality test was done to check whether the data is normally distributed or not. Normality analysis was done to conclude whether the data meet the assumption of parametric tests. And values of mean and median were compared; a smaller difference in the values of mean and median shows that the data is normally distributed.

Table 2: Normality analysis (N=575)

Variables	Mean	Median	Skewness		Kurtosis	
			Statistic	SD	Statistic	SD
Emotional manipulation	21.59	24.00	.215	.102	-.215	.203
Aggression	124.54	123.00	.265	.102	2.12	.203
Empathy	60.64	62.00	-.836	.102	2.39	.203
Self-serving-cognitive distortions	47.88	49.00	-.136	.102	-.459	.203

The above table shows that the data is normally distributed and the values of skewness and kurtosis are acceptable.

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Table 3: Reliability analysis of emotional manipulation. Aggression, empathy, and self-serving cognitive distortions (N=575)

Variables	No of items	Alpha (α)
Emotional manipulation	10	.83
Aggression	57	.90
Empathy	20	.84
Self-serving cognitive distortions	18	.90

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The cutoff scores were not given in the manual of the scales. Hence, the cutoff scores were discovered by using percentile ranks. The score at the 50th percentile was maintained as the cutoff score of all scales.

Table 4: Prevalence of Trait Emotional Manipulation, Aggression, Empathy, and Self-serving Cognitive Distortions in Adults (N=575)

Variables	Frequency	Prevalence
Presence of aggression	421	73.0 %
Absence of aggression	156	27.0 %
Presence of the trait emotional manipulation	350	60.7 %
Absence of trait emotional manipulation	227	29.3 %
Presence of empathy	502	87.0 %
Absence of empathy	73	12.7 %
Presence of self-serving cognitive distortions	350	60.7 %
Absence of self-serving cognitive distortions	225	39.0 %

The above table shows that 73.0% participants have aggression, 60.7% participants have trait emotional manipulation, 87.0% participants have empathy, and 60.7% participants have Self-serving cognitive distortions.

Discussion

The results of the current study indicated high levels of aggression (73.0%), trait emotional manipulation (60.7%), empathy (87.0%), and self-serving cognitive distortions (60.7%). This seems to reflect a complex psychological profile-one in which both prosocial and antisocial tendencies appear to coexist.

The high prevalence of aggression suggests that many participants experience difficulties managing negative affect or responding adaptively to conflict. Previous research suggests that aggression often results from poor emotional regulation, exposure to stress, or environmental reinforcement of aggressive responses (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). The substantial percentage found in the present study is consistent with literature showing that aggression is fairly common in populations experiencing interpersonal or situational challenges.

Trait emotional manipulation was also present in 60.7% of participants. Emotional manipulation is defined as a personality-based tendency to influence or control others' emotions for personal gain (Austin, Farrelly, Black, & Moore, 2007). Its presence here suggests that a sizable portion of individuals may use manipulative or exploitative interpersonal strategies. Previous research indicates that such tendencies typically coincide with personality features like Machiavellianism, callousness, or emotional intelligence applied for exploitative purposes (Grieve & Mahar, 2010). The comorbidity

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of emotional manipulation and aggression within the sample would therefore suggest a coercive or dominance-oriented pattern of interpersonal behavior.

Interestingly, the overwhelming majority of participants reported high empathy (87.0%). At face value, empathy should theoretically buffer against aggression and manipulative behavior because high levels of empathy are thought to result in prosocial actions and inhibit antisocial behaviors (Eisenberg et al., 2010). However, empirical research distinguishes between two subtypes of empathy: cognitive empathy-defined as an understanding of the feelings of others-and affective empathy-defined as the feeling of others' emotions. Highly manipulative individuals may thus possess high cognitive but low affective empathy and appear empathic yet manipulate others or engage in aggression because they strategically use emotional insight rather than employ it compassionately (Ali & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2010). This may explain why high empathy sometimes co-occurs with aggression and manipulative tendencies in this sample. As Davis himself noted, self-report empathy measures are vulnerable to social desirability bias, which may artificially elevate scores (Davis, 1983).

The presence of maladaptive thought patterns is further evidenced by the finding that 60.7% of participants endorsed self-serving cognitive distortions. According to Barriga, Gibbs, Potter, & Liau (1995), these distortions are defined as a process whereby one justifies damaging or antisocial acts in a manner that maintains one's self-image. Previous studies have found that such forms of distorted thinking are significantly associated with aggression, rule-violating behavior, and dysfunctional interpersonal relationships (Gibbs, 2014). Converging high levels of the current data on cognitive distortions, aggression, and emotional manipulation would therefore suggest that biased thinking may be used to rationalize behaviors that deviate from social norms. The overall findings represent an interesting psychological pattern-high empathy along with manipulation, aggression, and cognitive distortions.

Limitations

In this research, self-reported questionnaires were used to measure four variables. So, there are chances that participants select a socially desirable answer to the question. It is not certain that participants completely understand the statements in the research. If participants misunderstand the question, their response might be biased, which could have an effect on the results. Several randomly selected respondents were removed from the sample due to their unavailability and refusal to participate in the research. Participants were hesitant to fill out the standardized questionnaires since they were long and contained big statements. Many questionnaires were either unfinished or filled in a careless manner, and these were eliminated from the research. Due to demographic and cultural variations, the current study's conclusions can only be applied to the adult population of Punjab.

Recommendations

Using a bigger sample size might be beneficial. Given the high effect for the overall model, the current study's sample size for participants offered acceptable power. A bigger sample size, on the other hand, would have allowed for a more thorough examination of the impact of individual variables. Further research should be conducted in this domain in order to get a deeper understanding of the mechanisms that underpin trait emotional manipulation as well as the nomological character of emotional manipulation. The future studies should assess emotional manipulation through behavioral measures rather than through self-report, as used in this research.

Implications

The current research depicted that in a number of areas, emotional manipulation may occur, such as in interpersonal relationships. This provokes further researchers to explore the extent of emotional manipulation within the workplace, in the context of intimate relationships and parent-child relationships. Aggression is a common trait, can be easily observed by all types of people. Whereas emotional manipulation is a hideous act, not everyone can know they are being manipulated. Hence, aggressive behavior can be a key to unlock emotional manipulators, leading to people saving themselves from emotional manipulators.

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